

# **The Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on Korean EFL Learners' Acquisition of the English Article System**

Kyu-Eun Cho  
(Seoul National University)

Cho, Kyu-Eun. 2009. *The Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on Korean EFL Learners' Acquisition of the English Article System*. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language* 8, 59-74. This paper presents a quasiexperimental study exploring the use of written corrective feedback in aiding the learners' acquisition of the English articles. The debate regarding 'how to teach grammar' is a difficult debate to close because we haven't fully answered the question of which device is the most effective in teaching each grammar form. In practice, it is up to the decision making strategy of the instructor that will define 'how to teach grammar' in a classroom. The instructor must consider the inherent properties inside each grammar form upon choosing a teaching device and the more information the instructor has in making the decision, the more effective it will be. A research on one teaching device, written corrective feedback, for one grammar form, English articles, is presented in this paper. (Seoul National University)

**Keywords:** article acquisition, written corrective feedback

## **1. Article acquisition**

An EFL teacher may find it difficult to understand why, after years of learning, the students still seem to make their article choice randomly. It is likely that the students develop their own theories of the English article system (Butler 2002), but are kept from using articles native-likely due to the inherent properties inside the English article system.

First of all, the English language is a subject-prominent language which requires a complex system of determiners for clarifying referentiality and specificity of the topic position during a discourse. The Korean language on the other hand is a topic-prominent language where the definiteness of the topic position is already semantically marked so that there is no need for its grammaticalization by articles. This topic-prominence of learner's L1 is believed to be transferred onto the

L2, which results in frequent omission of articles in the topic position by these learners (Jarvis 2002). Korean learners can also be seen as having a syntactic deficit (Hawkins and Chan 1997) so that, despite having adopted the surface morphophonological article forms, the learners might link these forms to their own interlingual syntactic representation that is incompatible with the true L2 representation. There is also the semantic mismatch between L1 and L2 with respect to how the notion of definiteness is encoded in each language, which necessitates the adjustment of L1 semantics to match the L2 (Huebner 1983). Thus, the complexity arising from syntactic and semantic differences between the English and Korean languages requires Korean learners to acquire an entirely new system of encoding the notion of definiteness in order to accurately use the English article system.

In addition, the English articles are one of the non-robust features of the English language, which may account for the significant variability among the EFL learners' article use. They are non-salient and do not consist of one-to-one form-function relationship, so that the learners often find it difficult to set about a consistent article choice tactics. The non-saliency comes from the fact that, despite being one of the most frequently occurring function words in the English language, the articles are phonologically unstressed and are consequently difficult for learners to discern their presence. Their high frequency itself poses a challenge for learners of maintaining conscious rule application during the course of the learning process. The lack of one-form-one-function relationship, in addition, places a considerable burden for the learners who have to generate a complex network between the multiple functions and the single morphemic articles (Master 2002, Andersen 1984).

Considering the inherent complexity as well as the non-robustness, the question is how an instructor should guide the learners to establish such an intricate, new system of language. Should it be through an explicit rule explanation raising the metalinguistic awareness and conscious processing of the given rules, or should it be through an implicit stimulation of the pattern recognition and subconscious rule extraction via provision of relevant input?

## **2. Explicit learning and implicit learning**

Although we cannot draw a definite line between the two concepts representing the state of knowledge within our minds, the explicit-implicit distinction in language pedagogy is often equated with the dichotomies of conscious-subconscious learning processes and inductive-deductive teaching strategies. Explicit knowledge is viewed as conscious knowledge learned through explanation, observation, conceptualization of the rules of the target language, whereas implicit knowledge is viewed as subconscious knowledge acquired through extensive exposure to the target language input (Burgess and Etherington 2002).

Such a dichotomy needs to be replaced eventually with a model which will better address the following issues: on the one hand, explicit instruction may not just lead to explicit learning but also to implicit learning, as it displays both the rule explanation inducing the learner's cognitive processing skills and the input exposure for the learners to deduce the rules subconsciously, and on the other hand, even in the absence of explicit instruction, the learners could lead themselves to explicit learning by attempting to formalize a rule out of a set of input data through problem solving skills. There is evidence that these issues are especially vivid when the language rule in concern is complex. Green and Hecht, in their 1992 study, have reported that explicit instruction, while effective for simple structures, can be counterproductive for confusing, complex structures.

Overall, the learners who receive explicit instruction as well as implicit exposure to forms would have the best out of the two realms of the dichotomy. They can use explicit instruction to direct and focus their attention on the specific linguistic form in concern, switching on the noticing function, thereby 'getting the more out' of the subsequent input flood. Considering the above issues, what learners acquire in the end is probably the linkage between a cue and a pattern, so that the provision of a carefully designed instruction for promoting both the explicit and the implicit learning from the learners is what should be sought after by EFL classes (MacWhirney 1997).

### **3. Written corrective feedback**

The written corrective feedback that will be dealt with in this paper is

the one for correcting grammatical errors. There are many different types of such written corrective feedback available for the teachers (for a well-summarized review, see Ellis 2008), but there is no clear-cut answer yet to the question of which type of written corrective feedback, among many, is the most effective. A typology of written corrective feedback is given on table 1.

Table 1. A summarized typology of written corrective feedback

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
FOCUSED	<p>a            a</p> <p>A dog stole \bone from \butcher.</p> <p>: feedback on one type of grammatical error</p>
UNFOCUSED	<p>over    a            a            saw a</p> <p>When the dog was going <del>through</del> \bridge over <del>the</del> river he <del>found</del> dog in the river.</p> <p>: feedback on every type of grammatical error</p>
DIRECT	<p>over    a            a            saw a</p> <p>When the dog was going <del>through</del> \bridge over <del>the</del> river he <del>found</del> dog in the river.</p> <p>: cross out unnecessary word, insert necessary word, write the correct form above the error</p>
INDIRECT	<p>A dog stole bone from butcher.            2</p> <p>A dog stole \bone from \butcher.</p> <p>: just indicate the number of errors or indicate the location of error</p>
META-LINGUISTIC	<p>(1)            (2)</p> <p>A dog stole bone from butcher.</p> <p>(1), (2) - you need 'a' before the noun when a person or thing is mentioned for the first time</p> <p>: provide the learners with explicit comment about the nature of the error</p>
ELECTRONIC	<p>: provide the learners with a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides an extensive corpora of sentences incorporating the correct form of the error</p>

While the search for the best written corrective feedback is still a challenge among the researchers (Ferris 2004, Guenette 2007), the teachers on the actual battlefield are eager to be informed of at least a clear

guidance sheet presenting every option available, merits and demerits of each option, and strength and limitation of the research on each option, so that they can make their choice and make use of the full potential of the chosen feedback type for the particular task they set for their students. Moreover, despite the researchers who declare written corrective feedback ineffective, the students expect and deserve a consistent and carefully chosen feedback from their teachers once they enroll in an EFL course.

In the hope of meeting the needs of both the teachers and the students in an EFL class, I have chosen to investigate the effects of FOCUSED DIRECT written corrective feedback on the learner's article acquisition in order to verify the effectiveness of one particular written corrective feedback type on one particular grammar form. The rationale for choosing the FOCUSED DIRECT type as the subject of investigation is as follows:

1. Although the UNFOCUSED type has the advantage of addressing a range of errors thereby presenting the learners with a more detailed picture of the target language, the FOCUSED type will maximize the learner's attention on one linguistic form and lessen the processing burden during the learning process thereby accelerating the acquisition of the focused form. Moreover, regarding article acquisition in particular, it will provide the learners with a bombardment of written input which will raise the learner's awareness of the non-salient articles. This will not be achieved by UNFOCUSED type where the weak saliency problem of articles is not solved or even more intensified by scattering the learner's attention over a crowd of linguistic forms.
2. The DIRECT type has the merit of increasing the learner's awareness of the errors and providing a clear guidance on how to correct them. However, since it does not require the learner to exert high level processing, its long-term effect is yet to be assured. For this reason, stronger current of SLA research on written corrective feedback is on the INDIRECT type which is believed to engage the learners in problem solving leading to long-term acquisition. What we must consider at this moment is whether this trend is applicable to all learners. Indeed, those researches supporting the INDIRECT type have been carried out on ESL learners who have the advantage of being constantly exposed to a flood of English

language input. For EFL learners, without such input flood, the story may turn out differently.

At the same time as verifying the effectiveness of focused direct written corrective feedback (fdWCF), the effects of two more feedback types were also investigated for which I have coined the term *paired* written corrective feedback. One such type will employ the fdWCF paired with an additional feedback that will provide explicit rule explanation for the learner's article errors, hence the name *paired explicit*, and the other type will employ the fdWCF paired with an additional feedback that will promote implicit rule extraction through a list of example sentences incorporating correct article use, hence the name *paired implicit*. It is plausible to hypothesize that these pairings will enhance or complement the focused direct feedback, as the additional feedback will lead the increased learner's attention straight onto the understanding of the nature of the focused linguistic form. In sum, the research questions of the present paper are as follows:

1. Is the focused direct written corrective feedback (fdWCF) effective for improving the learner's use of articles?
2. Which type of paired fdWCF (pe-fdWCF or pi-fdWCF) is more effective for improving the learner's use of articles? Why?  
(pe- stands for paired explicit, pi- stands for paired implicit)

## **4. Support from a quasi-experimental study**

### **4.1 Research design**

#### **4.1.1 Participant and procedure**

Three participants of low English proficiency were recruited for the study on the ground that they all have stopped English learning after college. The characteristics of each participant and the treatment given to each are summarized on table 2. The sequence of treatments is summarized on table 3.

Table 2. Participant description

name (arbitrary)	TEPS score	major at college	job after graduation	treatment
Julie	< 500	art and design	book designer	fdWCF
Jesse		engineering	financial planner	pe fdWCF
Jamie		management	financial planner	pi fdWCF

Table 3. Sequence assigned to all three participants

Day	Activity
1 (11/22)	pre test + retrospective interview
2 (11/29)	editing task 1 + treatment + immediate post test + retrospective interview
3 (12/ 6)	editing task 2 + treatment
4(12/13)	delayed post test + retrospective interview

#### 4.1.2 Pre-test and post-test

According to the semantic wheel proposed by Huebner (1983), there are four categories of articles: [+SR, +HK], [+SR, -HK], [-SR, -HK], [-SR, +HK]. For a detailed description of each article category, see APPENDIX A.

The pre-test and the post-test differ only by the order of questions and each includes two sets of questions; one set of 20 fill-in-the-blank and the other set of 20 awkwardness-checking questions. In both sets, the four article categories were reflected on five questions each. See APPENDIX B. A retrospective interview immediately after the completion of the pre-tests and the post-tests recorded the students' reasons for their article choices.

### 4.1.3 Treatment: editing task and feedback

For the treatment, the participants were assigned an editing task after which they were given the appropriate feedback type and asked to revise the given feedback. For the editing task and the feedback types, see APPENDIX C.

The rationale for choosing to assign an editing task instead of a writing task is as follows: one, it eliminates the possible learner variables resulting from having to transcribe personal thoughts into second language format, and two, it enhances the learner awareness around the specific focus of the forthcoming input, and three, if proven effective, it can be exploited as a form of article teaching device either as an in class activity or as homework in an actual EFL class.

## 5. Results and discussions

Pre-test scores and post-test scores are given on tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Pre-test score

name	pre-test	retrospective interview
Julie	37.5%	"I wasn't sure how to choose the correct article, so I have set my own rule: for the seemingly small entities, I have chosen <i>a</i> , and for the seemingly big entities, I have chosen <i>the</i> ."
Jesse	40.0%	"They were really difficult, much more difficult than I had anticipated. I only remembered few rules, but I'm not sure if I had applied them correctly."
Jamie	42.5%	"I can't really specify my reasons. I tried to rationalize my choice, but in the end I just followed my intuition."



Table 5. Post-test score

name	immediate post-test	delayed post-test	retrospective interview
Julie	52.5% (15.0 ↑)	40.0% ( 2.5 ↑)	"I still can't judge the correct answers very well. I kept on to the rule I set about at the beginning of the procedure."
Jesse	70.0% (30.0 ↑)	82.5% (42.5 ↑)	"I think it all depends on the translation or understanding of the whole sentence rather than just nouns in order to make the correct article choice within the sentence."
Jamie	75.0% (32.5 ↑)	82.5% (40.0 ↑)	"I think I've got the hang of it a little."

The comparison between pre-test and post-test scores seems to support the effectiveness of fdWCF in article acquisition since the scores of all three participants have improved over the period of one month. For the control participant Julie, the overall improvement ( 2.5 ↑ ) was not grand but what is notable is that the improvement measured immediately after the treatment (15.0 ↑) seems to have diminished as the procedure progressed on. This may lend support for the hypothesis that fdWCF alone may not produce as great an effect as when it is complemented by an additional feedback type within the paired WCF. As if to further support this hypothesis, the results from Jesse and Jamie, clearly showed an overall improvement of 42.5 ↑ and 40.0 ↑ respectively. It is also apparent that the improvement had been a gradual one when the immediate post-test and delayed post-test scores are compared. However, from the above data, the question of whether pi-fdWCF is more effective than pe-fdWCF cannot be answered. What's interesting here is that, although the difference is small, the rate of improvement seems to have been better facilitated immediately after the treatment for pi-fdWCF, whereas the overall rate of improvement seems to have been greater in the long run for pe-fdWCF. This better long run achievement from the pe-fdWCF treatment may be due to the fact that EFL learners tend to gradually develop metalinguistic knowledge regarding the English article system, and that metalinguistic knowledge being the consciously-accessed linguistic knowledge, the learner who is given a

metalinguistic feedback will acquire better use of the articles in the long run (Butler 2002). It may also be due to the fact that individual learners differ in their style of learning. There're learners who develop an analytic style through forming and testing hypothetical rules, and there're learners who develop a holistic style through experiencing and restructuring relevant data with little or no analysis. Jesse may have been the learner with an analytic style and Jamie a holistic style, resulting in a cumulative effect magnifying the effects of the treatments given (Hartnett 1985).

Additionally, analyzing the participants' performance on the individual questions of the tests poses an interesting agenda for future study.

Regarding question A "This is a nice house. Has it got \_\_ garden?", which comprises of the 'nonreferential' article type ([-SR, -HK]), Julie (fdWCF only) chose the in all three tests and failed to show any improvement, whereas both Jesse (pe-fdWCF) and Jamie (pi-fdWCF) chose the in pre-test but a in both post-tests suggesting they have acquired the correct article use immediately after the treatments. In the retrospective interview on this question, Jesse answered, "This garden here is not a particular garden but a general one, so I chose the article a.", and Jamie answered, "We don't know if this house has a garden or not. It's just a general garden, so I chose the article a."

Regarding question B "When we were in Rome, we stayed in \_\_ big hotel." and C "We went to \_\_ nice restaurant last weekend", both presenting the 'referential indefinite' article type ([+SR,-HK]), all three participants seem to have connected the +SR property with the article the, despite having had the correct intuitions at first. Julie said in the retrospective interview after the delayed post-test on these questions, "At first I felt a should be the answer, but today I remembered the rule I set about at first of choosing the for the big entities. So I chose the today." Jesse said in the interview, "At first I felt a should be the answer, but then after the treatment, I wasn't sure about the choice and I thought hard on these two questions. In the end I decided that, since it is the hotel where I stayed and the restaurant where I had a meal, the article should be the." The case of Jamie was a little different. For question B, Jamie got the wrong answer and he said, "If it is that the hotel was just seen by these people, the article would be a, but because the hotel was stayed in by these people, the article should be the." However, for question C, Jamie could correctly discern the -HK property despite the

initial blinding effect from +SR property, and gave the correct answer. He said, "Last weekend alone cannot fully provide specificity on this nice restaurant because no one will know which nice restaurant I'm talking about."

Although the statistical significance of the result of this quasiexperimental study is questionable due to the small number of participants as well as the short research period, it has shown the potential of the paired feedback types boosting up the long-term effect of the focused direct written corrective feedback. A more thorough study in the future which will expand the number of participants as well as the research period will help establish a novel teaching device for improving the EFL learners' article use as well as clarify the effects of paired written corrective feedback types.

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Kyu-Eun Cho  
minique@snu.ac.kr

## Appendix A

### The Four Article Categories (Huebner 1983, Butler 2002)

1. [+SR, +HK]    the      referential definites  
     I found a red box in my room. The box looked dangerous.  
     This book didn't sell well although the author was famous.  
     I won the match and the news quickly spread all over town.  
     The idea of coming to London was wonderful.  
     Pass me the pen.  
     There are nine planets traveling around the Sun.  
     The first person to jump into the cold water was my brother.
2. [+SR, -HK]    a/an, ø      referential indefinites, first mentions  
     I saw a rose blooming in the garden.  
     He keeps sending ø roses to me.
3. [-SR, -HK] a/an, ø      nonreferentials  
     I'm going to buy a new bicycle.  
     ø Bicycles would be a better transportation for our trip.
4. [-SR, +HK]    a/an, ø, the      generics, unspecifiabiles  
     A whale is a mammal.  
     The whale is a mammal.  
     ø Language is a great invention.

## Appendix B

### Selected Examples for Pretest and Posttest Questions

#### 1. Fill-in-the-blank Questions

\*다음의 빈칸에 a, an, the를 알맞게 넣으세요. 아무것도 필요치 않으면 ∅ 표시하세요.

- 1-5. I'm looking for \_\_\_ library where I left my glasses  
the other day. [+SR, +HK]  
6-10. Jane was wearing \_\_\_ pretty muffler. [+SR, -HK]  
11-15. This is a nice house. Has it got \_\_\_ garden? [-SR, -HK]  
16-20. I don't like \_\_\_ war. [-SR, +HK]

#### 2. Awkwardness-checking Questions

\*다음 문장들 중 어색하게 느껴지는 문장에 v 표시하세요.

- 1-5. Do you remember a movie that we saw last Thursday?  
[+SR, +HK]  
6-10. This is the nice room. Did you decorate it yourself?  
[+SR, -HK]  
11-15. Would you like an apple as your dessert?  
[-SR, -HK]  
16-20. A child learns very quickly.  
[-SR, +HK]

## Appendix C

### 1. Example for Editing Task

(\*the passages for the editing tasks were extracted and modified from Broukal, 2004)

\*다음의 지문에는 한 개 이상의 'article error'가 있습니다. 틀린 것을 바르게 고쳐주세요.

Twelve days after a<sup>1</sup> baby is born, a<sup>2</sup> priest visits a<sup>3</sup> family to name a<sup>4</sup> baby. A<sup>5</sup> priest makes the<sup>6</sup> horoscope for the<sup>7</sup> baby. To make the<sup>8</sup> horoscope, a<sup>9</sup> priest writes down where the<sup>10</sup> stars and planets were at a<sup>11</sup> time the<sup>12</sup> baby was born. From this, he reads the<sup>13</sup> baby's future and suggests a<sup>14</sup> good name for a<sup>15</sup> baby.

### 2. Example for pe-fdWCF feedback type

Twelve days after a<sup>1</sup> baby is born, a<sup>2</sup> priest visits ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> family to name ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> baby. ~~A~~<sup>the</sup> priest makes ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> horoscope for the<sup>7</sup> baby. To make the<sup>8</sup> horoscope, ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> priest writes down where the<sup>10</sup> stars and planets were at ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> time the<sup>12</sup> baby was born. From this, he reads the<sup>13</sup> baby's future and suggests a<sup>14</sup> good name for ~~a~~<sup>the</sup> baby.

1. 특정 한 아가가 아닌 일반적인 어떤 한 아가를 얘기하므로 a.
2. 특정 한 신부님이 아닌 일반적인 어떤 한 신부님을 얘기하므로 a.
3. 앞 문장에서 언급된 아가가 태어난 바로 그 가족을 얘기하므로 the.
- 4, 7, 12, 13, 15. 앞에서 언급된 바로 그 아가를 얘기하므로 the.
- 5., 9. 앞에서 이미 언급된 바로 그 신부님을 얘기하므로 the.
6. 별자리에 대해 처음 얘기하며, 특정 별자리를 지칭하지 않으므로 a.
8. 앞 문장에서 언급된 별자리에 대해 다시 언급하므로 the.
10. 뒤에서 언급되는 '아가가 태어난 그 시각의 stars and planets' 를 말하므로 특정한 별과 행성을 지칭하는 것이므로 the.

11. 아가가 태어난 바로 그 시각을 지칭하므로 the.

14. 아가에게 이미 정해진 이름이 아닌, 많은 이름 중 좋은 이름 하나를 말하는 것이므로 a.

### 3. Example for pi-fdWCF feedback type

Twelve days after a<sup>1</sup> baby is born, a<sup>2</sup> priest visits a<sup>3</sup> the family to name a<sup>4</sup> the baby. a<sup>5</sup> the priest makes the<sup>6</sup> a horoscope for the<sup>7</sup> baby. To make the<sup>8</sup> horoscope, a<sup>9</sup> the priest writes down where the<sup>10</sup> stars and planets were at a<sup>11</sup> the time the<sup>12</sup> baby was born. From this, he reads the<sup>13</sup> baby's future and suggests a<sup>14</sup> good name for a<sup>15</sup> the baby.

Correct Sentences	Incorrect Sentences
I have an idea, and the idea is good.	I have an idea, and idea is good. I have an idea, and an idea is good.
We ate a mango, and the mango was huge.	We ate a mango, and mango was huge. We ate a mango, and a mango was huge.
I went to a café, and the name of the café was Illie.	I went to a café, and the name of café was Illie. I went to a café, and the name of a café was Illie. I went to a café, and name of the café was Illie. I went to a café, and a name of the café was Illie.